

BRIEF REPORT

Introducing "ERIC", a living research ethics database

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Research ethics committees (RECs) in the UK are under criticism for inconsistency in both process and opinion. As chairmen of a multicentre REC and a local REC, we felt that one possible reason was the lack of convenient, up to date guidance for chairmen, administrators, and members.

We recognised that there is no shortage of material for REC members to read but it is time consuming to access and difficult to apply to questions raised by review of research projects. International bodies have produced guidance; political organisations and governments have laid down legal frameworks, and "August Bodies" have delivered their opinions. Some now appear electronically but much is still only available in print.

THE ETHICS AND RESEARCH INFORMATION CATALOGUE (ERIC)

To address these problems we have created ERIC, an information source now available on line (<http://www.eric-online.co.uk>). It contains references to

- European Union and international directives—for example, ICH-GCP
- National legislation
- Work from research and ethics bodies
- Articles of relevance
- Experience of researchers and ethicists in the field
- Current public opinion

We believe this will:

- Inform REC member of views, articles, and guidance
- Inform researchers
- Establish broad base of opinion and challenge unsubstantiated prejudice in committee
- Promote consistency
- Become an educational tool

It will have the advantages:

- Its electronic nature will allow easy access
- The screen is the beginning and the end, summaries of articles are available, and where possible direct internet addresses are provided

WHY THIS IS MORE THAN "JUST ANOTHER WEB SITE"

ERIC is designed to allow rapid access to current material relevant to the review of medical research. It goes further than available resources, which are not easily scanned for a single topic of interest. It is difficult for the busy REC member to search through volumes of print or screens of text to find what is relevant to his query about a research project the committee is considering.

The Ethics and Research Information Catalogue allows rapid "topic based" searches that can be undertaken using keywords (a list of keywords can be viewed through the home page). Such compilations, which the reader can construct him or herself, will incorporate guidance, reference to legal frameworks, and opinion from "august bodies". It has been designed to allow even the most computer wary REC member to look up references!

There is a facility which allows readers to make comments about the material on the database and any evident deficiencies.

Readers can submit material they feel should be put onto the database. This can be done electronically. Any submitted material will be reviewed by a collation group and if appropriate entered onto the database.

We believe this will create a living, relevant, and up to date database that will facilitate ethical review of research. We also feel that researchers may also find this a useful resource when submitting proposals. Members of the pharmaceutical industry have already shown an interest.

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